

# Postcard: Minneapolis.

In a pioneering Minnesota charter school, you don't have to be Chinese to get a head start in Mandarin. **Saying *ni hao* to language immersion in the heartland**

BY HARRIET BAROVICK

**O**N THE OUTSIDE, BETSY LUETH'S school looks like any other in this arty neighborhood of Minneapolis: a sprawling, boxy red brick building with plain steel doors. Yet inside, the blond, gregarious Minnesotan presides over an institution unique in the heartland: Yinghua Academy, a charter public school where elementary students of every ethnicity study subjects ranging from math to American history in Mandarin.

Yinghua, the first such immersion program in the Midwest, is on the leading edge of a movement that in recent years has seen Chinese-language programs spread rapidly throughout the U.S. In 2000 an estimated 5,000 kids were taking Mandarin in the U.S. This year the number is closer to 60,000. Now in its third year of operation, Yinghua moved this semester into a 45,000-sq.-ft. (4,200 sq m) former elementary school.

The idea behind Yinghua, as with many immersion programs, is to introduce kids to the language and culture as early as possible—ideally, before age 12, while they're still absorbing information like sponges. Kindergartners and first-graders are taught exclusively in Mandarin, and a single period of English is introduced in second grade. By sixth grade, kids are learning half in English and half in Mandarin, with the expectation of proficiency in both. In Yinghua's classrooms, the walls are covered not with ABCs but with pictures and Chinese characters describing seasons, weather and the months of the year. On a hallway map of the world, the phrase WE LIVE IN BEAUTIFUL MINNESOTA is written in Chinese next to their home state. During a recent lesson in American history, the classroom walls featured images of—and Chinese words for—Mount Rushmore, the White House and President Obama (or 奥巴马总统).

The challenges at Yinghua are numerous. Most teachers come from Taiwan or



**Colorful characters** Yinghua first-graders line up in class for a midmorning bathroom break

mainland China, and cultural misunderstandings prevail. Lueth's instructors are learning to be tolerant of local norms like nontraditional families and boys who cry—as well as a lot more parental input than they're used to. "In China, teachers are revered. They are not questioned," says Luyi Lien, Yinghua's Taiwan-born academic director. "In America, parents are more ... expressive of their opinions."

Yinghua's student body, once 70% Asian, is now 50% white, black or Hispanic. The school has more than tripled its enrollment, to 300 kids, many of whom commute an hour each way. When parents Paul and Tess DeGeest moved back to Minneapolis from Washington, they wanted their daughter Audrey to progress beyond their own "lovely but Wonderbread" upbringing. "Why would you not give your child an opportunity like this?" asks Paul. "It's another arrow in the quiver for her that most people will never have."

Research has shown that in the long run, immersion programs can provide cognitive benefits, including more flex-

ible, creative thinking. Though students from the programs lag for a few years in English, by fifth grade they perform as well as or better than their monolingual peers on standardized reading and math tests. For multicultural families, the psychological boost can also be important. Lueth, a former teacher and manufacturing executive, co-founded the school as a way to expose her adopted Chinese daughter Lucy to her native culture. Lucy used to squirm when cousins asked why her skin color was different from theirs; before she started at Yinghua, she was resistant to exploring anything related to China. Now, Lueth says, Lucy proudly answers her cousins, "Yeah, I was born in China."

Lueth recently won an \$800,000 grant from the Department of Education to develop a teaching model for immersion middle schools, and she advises educators around the country who are starting their own programs. If Yinghua can make Mandarin a success in Minnesota, she tells them, so can they. "This is a glorious culture—and an increasingly important language—that we are meaningfully teaching to our children," she says. "And we're in the middle of nowhere." ■

